

TRANSCENDING THE CINEMATIC UNIVERSE: THE META-SIMULATORY ATTRIBUTE OF PAWAN KUMAR'S LUCIA

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ABSTRACT

The article delves into the thematic depths of Lucia (2013) an offbeat yet, highly ingenious film, written and directed by, Pawan Kumar. The film is notable for blending a unique theme, with solid technical expertise. The primary focus of the article is to explore the underlying theme of reality and illusion as witnessed in the film, which seems to have taken cue, from the sceptic hypotheses of the past and by doing so, attempts to unravel a parallel thread that runs within and outside of its cinematic universe. The article goes about its task of a thematic excavation, by breaking down its non-linear tripartite narrative structure, so as to chronologically position the chain of events that ensues.

KEYWORDS: *Fabula, Syuzhet, Dream, Reality, Illusion, Dream Argument, Simulation & Escapism*

Received: Jun 05, 2017; **Accepted:** Jun 25, 2017; **Published:** Jul 18, 2017; **Paper Id.:** IJELAUG201710

INTRODUCTION

'Avant-garde cinema' – the anti-thesis of the traditional films – are pretty much known for their rigorous attempt, to constantly challenge the existing cinematic conventions. They tend to breach the tried-and-tested aspects of filmmaking, in an effort to render possible, the director's unique authorial voice, which on most occasions, are melted away upon implementing certain sets of formulaic tropes. Generally, films that are 'avant-garde' boast, of a conglomeration of disparate things such as non-linear narratives, unusual camera angles, absurd sounds and mismatch editing etc. With a story that is unique in its own right and an inventive non-linear narrative, to complement it – not to mention the extensive use of unorthodox camera movements and editing – *Lucia (2013)* falls right into this revolutionary module of cinema.

Performing an autopsy upon a highly disjointed or non-linear narrative such as *Lucia's* where, events unfold in a non-chronological fashion requires in its first place, a proper framework that would go on to facilitate the article's ultimate purpose, of a thematic excavation. Here, a formalist takes on the order of narrative as implemented by, the Russian Formalists, Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky is incorporated so as to trace out the act of *simulation*, as resulting from the inherent escapist tendency of its protagonist and eventually, tracing its mirror-like attribute upon the spectator's own sense of *escapism*. Such a dissection, upon the film's labyrinthine, yet ingenious narrative structure is realized by drawing out a distinction between its *Fabula* and *Syuzhet*: terms originating from the formalistic sense of Propp and Shklovsky that describes narrative construction.

The close connection between the two terms however, results in complexities, which to an extent can be cleared, by taking into account the Aristotelian contention of favouring narrative plots, with a proper beginning, middle and end. While *Fabula* or 'story', is the chronological unravelling of events, *Syuzhet* or 'plot' is an actual arrangement of those events – not necessarily in a chronological order – as laid out in the work (Dix, 2008). In

other words, a *Fabula* is the natural flow of events, as perceived by the characters inside a literary or cinematic universe; and a *Syuzhet* is the linear or sequential ordering of events, as presented to the reader or audience of that particular work. In a cinematic sense, a viewer's perception of the *Fabula*, can heavily be altered with respect to its corresponding *Syuzhet*, as the latter helps build up or relieve the dramatic tension, that otherwise fall flat upon the viewers. *Fabula* of a work can be decoded or reconstructed, from its *Syuzhet* as it is to this domain alone, that a viewer has complete access.

On exercising the aforesaid terms of formalistic origin, one is convinced that, the *Syuzhet* of *Lucia* severely modifies its *Fabula*. Following is the *Syuzhet* of the key events, contained in the film. It opens with a detective investigating, a case involving a comatose on life support that attracts immense scrutiny, from the media and public alike. The investigation leads the detective and his cohorts to the eponymous pill, before the screen cuts, to the sequence of Nikki, an insomniac, who is seen, popping in a pill – revealed to be, the same kind the detective stumbles upon earlier – that triggers wish fulfilment dreams wherein, people around him in real life play support cast. Thanks to a largely monotonous life, Nikki starts to take solace in his dream life – made possible by the pill – which fantasises him as a popular film star, who goes by the name Nikhil. His immense fame in the dream world means that, his love life bloomed at a break-neck speed, which was opposed in the real world, where he struggled a big time. However, things start to take violent turns, when his dream ego was attacked by a hit man, who also attacks and leaves his mentor for dead in real life. A dramatic change in fortune befalls as his luck in dreams, begin to run out of steam all the while, managing to hold things together in real life. Convinced that, his happiness lies in the real world, he jumps off the roof of a building, after reconciling with his lady love, in the hope of terminating his dream state and wake up as his original self, only to run into a startling revelation: that he had been Nikhil, the film star all along, who craved for a common man's anonymity to a film star's popularity, and it was this wish that, the so called dream pill had fulfilled and not the other way around. It is also revealed that, the investigation involving a comatose, as seen in the very beginning, belonged to none other than Nikhil the film star, vindicating the copious amount of public scrutiny, it generated. His over-dependence on the pills, to remain lucid in his dreams, seems to have muscled him into a hyper real world, where the distinction between reality and fantasy gets distorted.

The *Syuzhet* of *Lucia* was crafted ever so cleverly, as to preserve the element of 'surprise' that hits the viewers out of thin air, as the film races towards its denouement; and to raise not, even the slightest of suspicions which, may otherwise betray the story's inherent elusiveness. Nevertheless, the *Syuzhet* is also generous enough to lay down crucial signposts at various intervals that can guide any observant viewer in his/her rollercoaster journey through the realms of the protagonist's real and dream life. This magnanimity is well evident in the film's pre-credits sequence, which begins with a recital of *NeeMayeyolago*, a poem by Kanaka Dasa – poet-philosopher from medieval Karnataka and an excerpt of the story *Zhuang Zhou Dreams of Being a Butterfly* by, Chinese Philosopher Zhuangzi. The former interrogates the notions of perception and illusion, as mentioned in the Hindu concept of Maya, while the latter voices the philosopher's sceptic concern and his difficulty in demarcating dream and reality.

The story's theme and the impending fate that awaits its protagonist is again implied – albeit subtly – towards the end of the pre-credits sequence, as the credits start to roll by, which is accompanied by, stunning shots of the pill's manufacture running in the background – both played out in reverse. It is therefore safe to assume that, as much as it preserves the story's 'surprise' element, the *Syuzhet* also transforms the film into a self-dismantling mechanism, that makes room every now and then, for muffled indications thereby, exposing its spine-chilling attribute to a keen eye, that cares to observe.

Thematically, the underlying concept of reality and illusion, as evidenced in the film has a very long philosophical and scientific history that can be traced back to the sceptical hypotheses of the ancient times. *Lucia* draws heavily from various literary and philosophical works. Throughout history, dreams have served as a springboard, for sceptics who interrogated, whether our own reality may be an illusion. Zhuangzi, perhaps the earliest among a bunch of sceptics, in his *The Butterfly Dream*, tells about a dream in which, he fantasizes himself as a butterfly fluttering around gleefully, and upon waking wondered, whether he is a man dreaming of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming of being a man.

Western philosophers have ever since gone on, to generate their own versions of sceptic thoughts on reality and illusion, chief among them being the postulations made, by the 17th century French philosopher Rene Descartes, who in his magnum opus *Meditations on first philosophy*, has given serious attention to what is now known as, the *dream argument*. Dreams more often than not, are indistinguishable from reality, as people often take their dreams to be real, when they are asleep. Such a false perception, Descartes attributes to the vulnerability of one's senses, which are promptly deceived by the simulation, occurring in the dream. Descartes's sceptic concern is that, the very reality we live in may well, be an illusion and since the senses are susceptible to deception, they can never really be trusted, to distinguish reality from dreams.

Descartes's predications, on the distinction between dream and reality, is said to have an obvious archetype in elements pertaining to Plato's *Allegory of the cave*. It showcases the philosophers in a positive light, whose way of perceiving the world stands apart from the rest. The allegory tells about a group of people, living inside a cave chained to a wall. These prisoners are tethered in such a way that, their neck and legs are immobile thus, arresting their gaze from exploring the cave and limiting it, only to another wall before them. Behind them is a fire, and between this fire and the captives is a pavement, with a low wall along, which other people walk carrying objects, above their head in such a way that, only the shadows of the objects are cast upon the wall, in front of the chained prisoners. Their captivity makes it impossible, to witness things happening in their background and as a result, the only thing they see is the shadows upon the wall, before them.

When people speak their sounds echo off the wall and reach the prisoners, who go on to believe that, the sounds are produced by the shadows. Chained to a wall in a cave and restricted to a very narrow space, the shadows have become the reality for these prisoners. They are oblivious about the actual proceedings inside the cave, much less than the real world, outside it. Plato then supposes the possibility of one captive, getting extricated. The unchained man scans the horizon, sees the fire and the people, but returns to his wall refusing to believe in the newly acquired reality. But if the prisoner is to be dragged out of the cave by force, he would struggle as the radiant sun would prove overwhelming to his unaccustomed eyes, blinding him temporarily. Eventually, his eyes adjust to the new surroundings and begin to see the vibrant world around him, as opposed to the grim shadows of the cave. He acknowledges the dazzling outer world's supremacy, over the sombre ambience of the cave and would also want his fellow cave dwellers, to witness the true reality for themselves. Upon re-entering the cave, he loses his vision again as his eyesight – now accustomed to the outer reality – becomes incompatible with the inside of the cave. However, his fellow cave inhabitants attribute his struggle to the journey he undertook outside the confines of the cave and goes on to believe that, the same fate would befall them should they undertake a similar journey outside. The ignorant prisoners therefore, see their returning counterpart as an ideal threat that should be dealt appropriately. According to Plato, a philosopher is like an unchained prisoner who comes to believe in the world he has just witnessed and not in the fabricated one as perceived by the other prisoners. These prisoners are absolutely satisfied with what their world has to offer and wishes not, to part ways with it making them immune to the pleas of the

philosophers.

Many a number of predications that can be seen as an upgrade over the sceptical hypotheses of antiquity have since emerged. *Brain in a vat* is one such modern-day argument that questions the notions of reality and consciousness much like its predecessors. It outlines the possibility of a human brain stored inside a vat filled with life-sustaining liquid. Attached to a powerful computer, the neurons of the brain receive sensory inputs, quite similar to those it receives in a normal state. As a result, a simulation of reality takes place allowing the incarcerated brain to experience thoroughly convincing sensations that, a brain in its otherwise embodied condition would normally experience. Since the brain inside such a vat receives sensory inputs identical to the one inside a skull, it cannot possibly know whether it is inside a vat or a skull.

A more notorious contemporary to the *Brain in a vat* thought experiment is the *Simulation hypothesis*, which claims the very reality we see and experience is in actuality, a simulation. First proposed by Hans Moravec and later expanded by Philosopher Nick Bostrom, the argument says that it is possible a technologically advanced future race creates an exact replica of the world as we know wherein, the simulated consciousness of its inhabitants are equivalent to the natural human consciousness. It goes on to speculate that the world we live in could well be a simulation run by this so called future race (Bostrom, 2003).

Fundamental to all these hypotheses is a process of *simulation* which is, replicating a reality to an extent indistinguishable from 'true' reality. Such a simulated world could hold conscious minds that are completely incognizant of the *simulation* happening around it thereby, taking the fabricated world to be its reality. The very thing that *Lucia* seems to have in common with the above-mentioned sceptical hypotheses is this presence of a conscious being living inside a world that is a product of pure simulation. With regards to the proposition that a *Fabula* can be subjected to reconstruction, a chronological regulation of the film's events tell about a character, whose inability to probe into the authenticity of the world he is in, gets him entangled to it. While Nikhil, the film star, dreams of being a common man; Nikki, his dream ego, dreams of being the same film star that he is in the real world triggering, a very complicated dream-within-a-dream scenario. Consequently, the actual dreamer – Nikhil in this case – is deceived by an extremely beguiling simulation that the pill had forged around him which obliterates the very boundary that separates his physical and dream space. As a result a rather confused Nikhil is forced to rely on his own senses to determine the veracity of his surroundings. The sceptic arguments of Descartes however, warn against establishing a forthright faith in one's own senses to determine the credibility of one's state of existence. Nevertheless, Nikhil decides to trust his senses – as opposed to the Cartesian view of suspecting the judgement of one's own senses – resulting in a state where, dreams become his reality.

At first glance, this act of simulation that forms the crux of the film may appear to be a mere tool that simply echoes the philosophical scepticism of the past. However, there is more to this process than meets the eye. The protagonist's very need for an alternative reality – as simulated by the dream pill in the film – implies an aversion that he has towards his real world. Disillusioned with his life as an actor, Nikhil develops a predilection to what can be called *escapism*. The term is often associated with those who choose to eschew the dull, disgusting, or banal facets of their daily life. Generally, escapist are viewed as unhappy individuals, considering their reluctance or inability to engage seamlessly with the world around them. They also are regarded as being incapable of forging harmonious or meaningful relationships with their fellow beings. The root of all escapist tendencies can be traced back to a deliberate prolongment of one's own recreational or rejuvenating activities to a point where, the individual appears to be trying to avoid the very reality of his existence altogether.

Detachment from the real world can be as beneficial as it is detrimental, depending upon the approach one implements. A momentary escape can enhance the well-being of a person, liberating him from the otherwise overwhelming rigours of daily life, as opposed to a frequent withdrawal which can leave a negative impact upon one's real life. There are numerous activities that aid people in this growing tendency of disengaging oneself from the hardships of daily existence. But no matter what avenue one chooses, escapism as mentioned earlier, when taken to the extreme can produce adverse effects upon an individual's real world. Many a number of activities that are instrumental in maintaining a healthy state of existence such as sleeping, eating, exercising or sexual activity – to name a few – would become thresholds of escapism when stretched to the utmost. Technological advancements in the modern age have brought about a digital culture where television, films, computer games etc., provide escapist adventure in an unprecedented level. Drugs, albeit being a controversial one, remains a popular choice, among serial escapists: one dangerous contemporary trend that, Lucia portrays successfully.

Notwithstanding his status as a successful actor with quite a strong fan following Nikhil yearns for an ordinary life quite far from the fame and stardom he currently experiences. The irony here is that, he finds fault with the glamorous lifestyle a star like him is forced to lead, and is only happy to trade such a life of luxury with that of a struggling, yet humble existence of a commoner when, they themselves are attracted to the overly expansive lifestyle a celebrity like him is bestowed with. Despite enjoying a prosperous career as a glittering film star, Nikhil is convinced that his personal life has been a huge disappointment where, a genuine relationship or bonding is hard to come by as, people around him tend to fake their emotions in the vain hope of getting into his good books. Surrounded by such hypocrites he claims that, it is literally impossible to spot people who exude true emotions from those who express the fake ones. Nikhil also believes that, a man from a relatively modest background is bound to strong familial ties and friendship where, people are more trustworthy than the ones a film star like him finds in company with. He is relieved from such a pitiless world, when an opportunity to take leave of it presents itself in the shape of the eponymous dream pill which he readily embraces thereby, bidding farewell to the real world and entering an alternative state of reality that the pill makes possible.

What begins as a mode of recreation soon evolves into an obsession as Nikhil gets addicted to the dream pill that lets him live a life he so desires. The pill achieves this by inducing lucid dreams – which in itself is a harmless activity. Practiced using proper techniques, this can be an effective stress buster as any. Lucid dreaming, much like the other escapist ventures, offers a reprieve from one's reality as a means to facilitate a better engagement with it. In other words, it enhances the quality of one's waking life (La Berge and Rheingold, 1991). In Nikhil's case however, the ever booming escapist tendency gets him addicted to the fictitious pill which duly delivers what it promises, but all the while inducing in him, an abnormal craving for the fake reality it simulates.

On one level, it is quite convincing to note that Nikhil's life plays itself in a plane parallel to the experience of a filmgoer. Cinema does to a viewer what; the psychedelic pill does to Nikhil in the film – which is opening up a portal to an entirely new world. The dream pill liberates him from his largely unsympathetic world in the same way; a film transports its viewers to a whole new realm thereby, liberating them from an otherwise hectic and monotonous world. The advent of motion pictures and the subsequent theatre culture it puts into motion happens to be a potent antidote to such a world fraught with drudgery. The hallucinogen as shown in the film induces lucid dreams which, unlocks a world of possibilities to the dreamer. Such dreams can be exhilarating and delightful as the dreamer – who is aware of his dream state – is bound to fulfil and satisfy his wishes there. While Nikhil uses such pills to conjure up a world that is very much in line with his thoughts and desires, a filmgoer on the other hand sees cinema as the best alternative, that generates vivid and vibrant

images that can neither be seen nor experienced elsewhere, except of course in dreams.

CONCLUSIONS

From the above perspective, it appears that *Lucia* operates on two levels: within and outside of its universe. Films being a mode of simulation that dispatch its viewers off to an alternative world, and *Lucia* being a film – and hence a mode of simulation per se – that has within its universe, a transportation of a character to a fantasy land customised according to his needs and desires; a public or private screening of the film happens to be a two dimensional process of simulation and concomitant escapism that transcends the boundaries of its cinematic universe. In other words, the narrative diptych of the protagonist in *Lucia* ventures beyond its own confines and merges with the thematic aspects to form a hybrid triptych whereby, a parallel trajectory can be drawn across the protagonist's condition and that of the viewers'.

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